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## **Interpretations of Child Centred Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care**

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# **Interpretations of Child Centred Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care**

## **Abstract**

The globalisation of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has resulted in increased scrutiny of ECEC services, including pedagogical approaches and how best to prepare the ECEC workforce. Child-centred practice has come to epitomise ECEC pedagogy, but questions remain as to what is child-centred and how a member of the workforce becomes child-centred. Hungary represents a particular reading of child-centred practice, based on a construct of a child-loving adult. Questionnaire data illustrates support amongst Hungarian pedagogues for the importance of love in ECEC, in support of a relational approach to working with children. However, observation and interview data from students indicates that the child-loving, child-centred ideal is both a weakly classified construct and that training and assessment practices create contradictory messages as to its meaning amongst students. The study has implications for how ECEC pedagogical ideals are realised in initial training and interpretations of child-centred practice.

## **Key Words**

Early childhood, training, pedagogue, intercultural, child-centred

## **Interpretations of Child Centred Practice in Early Childhood Education and Care**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has witnessed the dual (but not exclusive) trends of a growth in international research alongside a global interest in the social welfare function of ECEC services. The international sharing of ideas in ECEC has a long history (Georgeson et al. 2013), with a growth in international research of varying scales (Tobin 2005) that interact with a global interest in the quality of ECEC services amongst national governments and international organisations (Campbell-Barr and Leeson 2016). The two related trends have resulted in increased scrutiny of ECEC services and those who work in them. Associations between the training level of the ECEC workforce and the overall quality of ECEC (Early et al. 2006; Sylva et al. 2004) has identified the importance of ECEC initial training, but a lack of scrutiny of its content and delivery. The content of ECEC initial training will reflect assumptions about the purpose of ECEC services (such as ECEC as a social investment strategy), alongside cultural constructions of how best to care for and educate young children. Child-centred is often adopted as epitomising appropriate approaches for the care and education of young children. However, whilst it is evident that ECEC training models and structures vary internationally, so do interpretations of child-centred practice.

The research presented focused on Hungary as it has a history of providing degree level training for those working in kindergartens since 1958/9 (Oberhuemer et al. 2010), in addition to it not being well known within English literature. Further, prior research that considered the attitudes required for working in ECEC in Hungary and England (Campbell-Barr et al. 2015a; Campbell-Barr et al. 2015b) identified Hungary as an interesting case study. The prior research was framed by European Lifelong Learning agendas that provide a reference tool for education providers,

including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), to support the development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate for the context, but questioned the meaning of attitudes for ECEC. Focus groups with university tutors and students in one English and one Hungarian HEI looked to identify ‘attitudes’ for ECEC and where and how they might be developed. An online student survey ‘tested’ the attitudes identified on a larger sample in the two countries (Campbell-Barr 2017; Campbell-Barr et al. 2015a; Campbell-Barr et al. 2015b). One unexpected finding was 'love' received a higher average score (out of ten) from students in Hungary than in England. Love was identified more widely as being a deeply engrained pedagogical ideal within the Hungarian context, representing both a love of children and the forming of loving relationships between pedagogues and children (Brayfield and Korintus 2011; Kovács-Bakosi 2013). Conversely, in England love has been identified as contentious in constructions of ECEC professionalism (Page 2011). In particular, technocratic models of professionalism, favoured by policy objectives to upskill the workforce, were identified as privileging rational and entrepreneurial concepts of professionalism to the potential exclusion of emotions (Osgood 2010; Taggart 2011; Taggart 2014).

Whilst conscious that a comparison of two cases can result in polarisation (Alexander 2000), the research presented in this paper placed an emphasis on that which had been identified as unfamiliar and different (McNess et al. 2015) in the previous research. The presented study therefore sought to identify evidence of a child-loving ideal in Hungarian initial kindergarten pedagogue training. However, the research identifies that the child-centred ideal is a weakly classified concept within initial training. The research has implications for interpretations of

child-centred practice, explanations of (seemingly) international terminology and how pedagogical ideals are incorporated into initial ECEC training.

### **The Globalisation of ECEC**

Global interest in quality ECEC is well illustrated by reports from international organisations (e.g. OECD 2006; OECD 2011, European Commission 2011; European Commission 2014) that identify ECEC services as contributing to the social welfare agendas of supporting parental employment and providing early intervention to lessen the consequences of poverty (White 2011). International organisations, such as the OECD, do not have the power to dictate national policy agendas, but seek to influence national policy direction (see Mahon and McBride 2009) through documenting different ECEC structures, presenting recommendations for improvements and offering vignettes of ‘best practice’. Bench marks and peer reviews further seek to influence national policy, underpinned by panels of ‘expert’ judgement (Mahon and McBride 2009). However, the educational performance is based on desirable outcomes that are shaped by economic and social welfare agendas (Moss et al. 2016; Vandebroek et al. 2010) forming just one hierarchy for evaluating ECEC services.

Other hierarchies are shaped by theories that lend themselves to being transferred, constructed in such a way that it is easier for them to travel (Tobin et al. 2009). The Reggio Emilia ECEC model from Northern Italy has international recognition, but this will have been facilitated by a history of Italy sharing ideas on ECEC (for example Montessori), but also that the core ideas of the Reggio Approach appeal to middle class tastes of a democratic approach to ECEC (not to

mention the lure of travelling to Northern Italy - Tobin 2005). The approach focuses on communities of children and their position within the wider community, presenting a collective interpretation of child-centred, as opposed to a more individualised one. Despite the global success of the Reggio Approach, it illustrates the tension in the international sharing of ECEC ideas, whereby the Approach was developed following the Second World War, in response to a desire for new approaches to education (alongside supporting maternal employment), within a Socialist context (Tobin 2005) questioning how it relates to and is applied in other cultural contexts.

Language also contributes to the transferring of ideas on ECEC with a dominance of Anglo-American theories (Rhedding-Jones 2005). However, the Anglo-American paradigm can ascribe a different cultural meaning onto native language intentions in the process of translation (see Jensen 2016). For example, how best to refer to those who work in ECEC will be related to the cultural constructions of the purpose of ECEC services and those who work in them throughout history (Oberhuemer 2011; Oberhuemer 2014). In Hungarian to English translations ‘óvodapedagógus’ becomes nursery or kindergarten ‘teacher’, but I am frequently told that ‘educator’ provides a better understanding of the original meaning demonstrating the importance of questioning terminology and meaning (Alexander 2000).

The recognition for the cultural and historical context in shaping the provision and understandings of ECEC services, demonstrates how the practice of one country can be culturally misplaced in another (Oberhuemer 2014). ECEC institutions, such as pre-schools and

day nurseries, are cultural sites where cultural expectations on child rearing meet those on education and the needs of the labour market meet those of children's development (Tobin 2005). ECEC services therefore pose questions, of what is the image of the child and are services to prepare children for school or democratic citizenship (Miller and Cameron 2014)? Such questions challenge the legitimacy of the globalisation of ECEC and illustrate that there is no quick fix solution for adopting the education policy of one country into that of another (Shah and Quinn 2016). For example, Post-Communist reforms left many countries seeking answers to the 'problem' of education and whilst countries such as Poland and Estonia have been criticised for cherry picking educational ideas (Crossley 2000), Hungary adopted a more nationalistic regime.

### **Hungarian ECEC**

Hungary is not immune to the pressures of international comparisons, but it reflects Alexander's (2000) observation that education is shaped by historically important moments. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) when the borders of Hungary were re-defined following the First World War (Oberhuemer et al. 2010) and the reforming of Hungary as a democratic state following the fall of Communism in 1989 (Nagy Varga et al. 2015) have contributed to a nationalistic education model. Hungarian ECEC students are expected to undertake subjects in Hungarian language, culture, art and music (Oberhuemer et al. 2010). However, recent reforms to introduce compulsory ECEC for children from three to school age in Hungary, also demonstrate that it is susceptible to international influences, such as European Commission guidance. The globalisation of ECEC therefore becomes a paradox between meeting a gold standard of ECEC provision and recognising the importance of culturally located ideals. The focus on Hungarian ECEC initial training is presented as an example, which whilst grounded in



its cultural context, has implications for how cultural, pedagogical ideals are realised in other national contexts.

Hungarian ECEC divides responsibility for early education places for children from three to school age (which is typically six, but can be delayed until seven) and childcare services for younger children, between two Secretariats within the Ministry of Human Capacities. Those who work with younger children in *bölcsőde* are able to undertake a degree that was introduced in 2009, but prior to this staff completed a Higher-level Vocational Training Infant and Childcare degree, which took two years. Kindergarten pedagogues (*óvodapedagógus*) undertake a Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree, which includes compulsory subjects in education, psychology, social sciences, foreign language, Hungarian language, Hungarian culture, mathematics, art, music, science and curriculum methodology, with students spending around one third of their 2500 contact hours in practice (Oberhuemer et al. 2010). The *óvodapedagógus* BA forms the focus of the research.

A typical kindergarten class will have 20-25 children, with two *óvodapedagógus*, one who works in the morning, the other in the afternoon, with a two-hour overlap period and an assistant. There is a Core Programme to guide those working in *óvoda* (kindergarten), but this is adapted at a local level to meet the needs of the community. Pedagogical ideals within Hungarian ECEC (primarily relating to kindergarten provision due to a small proportion of childcare) are focused on the principals of protecting children and developing their skills and emotions through providing secure relationships by child loving adults (Brayfield and Korintus 2011; Korintus

2008; Kovács-Bakosi 2013). Support for child development, reflects a holistic approach of social, emotional and cognitive development, with pedagogical practices being play-based, incorporating the interests of children and supporting their independence and autonomy (Brayfield and Korintus 2011; Kovács-Bakosi 2013). Kovács-Bakosi (2013: p233) identifies child-centred practice as applying ‘unconditional love extended to all children’ and Brayfield and Korintus (2011) note that *szeretet* – love, and *játék* – play, are two of the oldest words in the Hungarian language. Demonstrating signs of love is attributed to supporting children to feel safe, with parents identifying ‘child-loving adults’ as important for the overall quality of ECEC (Brayfield and Korintus 2011). Hungarian ECEC therefore presents a particular reading of child-centred practice that forms the focus of the research.

## **Child-centred**

Child-centred practice represents a global discourse, used to represent a specialised pedagogy for ECEC, but it is a complex and multifaceted term informed by both cultural and historical interpretations. Chung and Walsh (2000) provide an overview of understandings of child-centred practice over history and in different texts, citing over 40 different uses of the term. They summarise that child-centred can be grouped under three core ideals of the child at the centre of their world, a developmental view of the child at the centre of their learning and a progressive view of the child at the centre of their learning. Whilst the origins of child-centred appear to be accepted as being grounded in the works of Froebel, Dewey, Rousseau, Montessori and Vygotsky (Chung and Walsh 2000; Lee and Tseng 2008; Wood 2007), the mix of theorists demonstrates the evolving history of the term whereby romantic concepts of the natural curiosity of the child have become incorporated with understandings of child development, alongside

more democratic constructions. Child-centred is representative of ECEC as a theoretical hybrid, informed by developmental psychology in its various forms, along with cultural theories and more recently sociological ones (Rhedding-Jones 2005).

Walkerdine (1984) illustrates how child-centred has become something of a paradox, offering the potential of a liberatory pedagogy that seeks to recognise children's autonomy and individualism and yet is grounded in theories of child development, with a regulatory gaze that requires pedagogues to both monitor and achieve development. Walkerdine (1984, 2005) suggests that it was not a monolithic super-power that created the paradox, but a desire to demonstrate the effectiveness of a pedagogical approach where the child was the leader of their world and their learning that contributed to the mixed messages of child-centred practice.

England illustrates how the normal child is used as a tool within policy agendas that present limited interpretations of child development and associated ECEC pedagogy (see Wood 2007, Powell 2010) as a regulatory gaze (Campbell-Barr and Leeson 2016) that is arguably also present at the global level (Tobin 2005). Within global contexts there are concerns that the normal child is Anglo-Saxon (Lee and Tseng 2008) or Anglo-American (Tobin 2005), with little consideration of the cultural relevance of the mythical normal child. Post-structuralist approaches encourage pedagogues to deconstruct child development and associated pedagogical discourses to consider alternative approaches (Dahlberg et al. 2013; MacNaughton 2005). Whilst the deconstruction process risks leaving uncertainty (MacNaughton 2005), a focus on a more ethical construct of ECEC, that is reflective of the romantic conception of child-centred alongside that of children's rights, is identified as offering pedagogical solutions (Dahlberg and Moss 2005).

Chung and Walsh (2000) acknowledge how the emergence of new ideas in the development of child-centred ideals does not result in old ones being eroded. The consequence is that those training to, and working in, ECEC find themselves mediating between the differing interpretations. Enabling free choice and focusing on children's interests in a play-based environment (as is evident in Hungary) epitomises child-centred ideologies, but in a group of 20+ children do they all have free choice, can all interests be followed (see Wood 2007)? Choices will be constrained by the environment and there is an inherent tension between an individualised concept of learning and one that recognises the child as part of a social group that pedagogues have to negotiate. Within Hungarian ECEC, there are aspects of both developmentalism and romanticism within the child-centred construct of a child-loving adult who protects children and supports their holistic development that pedagogues and students will have to negotiate.

### **Child-Centred Training**

The global discourse of child-centred includes investments in training in countries such as India (Sriprakash 2010), Taiwan (Lee and Tseng 2008) and Timor Leste (Shah and Quinn 2016) that, whilst not all explicitly focussed on ECEC, reflect a falling short of global quality standards. The internationalisation of child-centred practice and related training models raises questions of both the opportunities for culturally located interpretations of child-centred practice and whether it is possible to 'teach' an individual to be child-centred in all or some of its constructions. ECEC training models broadly seek to offer a range of learning opportunities designed to offer a variety of skills, techniques and approaches (Egan 2009). International examples of ECEC training demonstrate how training seeks to combine theory and practice in the development of mastery

(Jensen 2015). Time in practice provides opportunities for both applying and acquiring knowledge, with reflective practice enabling both an evaluation of knowledge and experience. Participation in ECEC practice is recognised as facilitating a process of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), whereby through experience the student moves closer to ‘mastery’ over time (Payler and Locke 2013). However, the context of a training environment means that students must be able to demonstrate their knowledge, from knowing the rhythm of an ECEC centre, to relating to a child, whilst also meeting the assessment frameworks that monitoring learning (Jensen 2015). Therefore, learning to work in ECEC involves both explicit and implicit ideas on the knowledge and skills required for working with children, gained via experiential and theoretical learning.

## **The Research**

The research was part of an 18month European project analysing ECEC training models, with a particular focus on Hungary. Prior to data collection, an academic year was spent participating in student practicum classes and holding seminar classes for Hungarian students in one HEI. Seminars enabled conversations with students about aspects of pedagogical practice, but without the influence of a Hungarian tutor. Conversely, the practicum classes enabled familiarisation with Hungarian ECEC pedagogical ideals, whilst becoming aware of how tutors and mentor-pedagogues reinforced the ideal, but with an ambiguous articulation. A research diary captured life as it happened (Bartlett and Milligan 2015), shaped by the weight and meaning that I ascribed to events. The diaries documented my thinking over the duration of the study (Snowden 2015), including my questioning of the pedagogical ideal.

My limited Hungarian language means that in the early stages of the project I was influenced by unofficial translators (such as colleagues), who would often present their own biases, sometimes in an attempt to reinforce the pedagogical ideal. My time in Hungary improved my understanding of Hungarian, but also the challenges of translation, particularly in relation to cultural meanings (Robinson-Pant 2016). Whilst I was conscious of exploring the meaning behind the language, my questioning of the pedagogical ideal could be interpreted as a failure to understand it. However, as an outsider I offered the advantage of being able to question the Hungarian child-centred loving ideal, not being bound by its discursive formation in the way that an insider might (Kelly 2014). Further, through participation in ECEC training as a researcher and tutor, alongside participation in daily life, such as attending local festivals and my son attending kindergarten, I became accustomed with Hungarian habits, customs and beliefs (see Marshall 2014). The analysis focuses on my interpretations (Robinson-Plant 2016), intended to open up explorations on if/how ECEC students are supported to realise pedagogical ideals.

Early stages of the research involved a cross European analysis of ECEC training requirements and models, literature review and document analysis, which informed a survey of Hungarian pedagogues to consider the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to work in ECEC. The online questionnaire adopted opportunity sampling, asking respondents to rate the knowledge, skills and attitudes identified (see Figure One) from one to ten. Other questions related to the core subjects in óvodapedagógus training and different methods of training, such as time in the kindergarten or lectures. Three-hundred-and-fourteen responses were obtained from an experienced group of pedagogues (on average participants had obtained their qualification 21 years ago), with 75.2%

having a BA and who largely (76.3%) worked in kindergartens. The dominance of kindergarten pedagogues is illustrative of the relatively low levels of ECEC services for children birth to three in Hungary. Geographically the respondents were concentrated in the areas in which Hungary's major cities are located. The opportunity sampling means the data is not representative, but it reflects broader trends in Hungarian ECEC provision.

A microanalysis of a HEI (with an on-sight training kindergarten) involved:

1. Narrative observations of students during their practice in the kindergarten,
2. Summarising discussion classes that followed student's practical training and
3. Individual interviews.

The observations were within the context of the student's training, whereby students spend a week in the training kindergarten and on their final day, their fellow students (group sizes were approximately 10 students) would observe them, along with a class tutor, mentor-pedagogue and myself. The narrative observations recorded students' activities and interactions for five minute intervals over a three hour period. Discussion classes involved a summary from the student of their week in the kindergarten before focusing on the day of the observations. Notes were taken during the classes to document the areas of discussion and the advice and guidance provided by both students and tutors. Individual interviews considered the activities and interactions observed, with a core question of 'how did you know what to do?' Students were also asked what knowledge, skills and attitudes they thought they needed to work with young children and where they developed them.

Undertaking the observations within the context of the students' training limited the research as many students commented in the interviews how they would become nervous as a result of being observed by their friends and tutor and/or that they felt the behaviour of the children could change. Interviews were conducted in English, creating difficulties for students who did not feel confident in their use of English. Occasionally students would use an online translator to help, but my time in Hungary had made me aware that I had to ask questions of the terminology being used in order to explore meanings.

Students were provided with an information sheet about the research in Hungarian, outlining the different stages and that participation was voluntary and would have no consequences for their academic studies. However, I was conscious of a power differential as Hungary requires formality in the student-teacher relationship (see Marshall 2014), whereby students refer to tutors as Doctor or Professor, reflecting a more hierarchical relationship than experienced in England. Further, within the British context I was used to completing ethics applications, including a sample information sheet, to be reviewed by a university department ethics committee. As a requirement of the funding there was an expectation that the ethics would be reviewed by my host institution in Hungary, which did not have an ethics committee. After lengthy discussions, the head of the university provided ethical approval, but questioned why it was needed. The different ethical procedures demonstrate how providing a participant with an information sheet and ethical consent form is culturally misplaced in Hungary and, combined with the power differential, is likely to have consequences for how students viewed their participation in the research. Given this, students were offered the opportunity to review their data prior to analysis, whilst also seeing the anonymity of the data. Seven students were involved



in the micro analysis and are presented for analysis, but are set against a context of having spent the prior year participating in similar observation and discussion classes. The one HEI and seven students are presented as being neither typical nor a-typical (Tobin et al. 2009) of Hungarian ECEC, but a vehicle for discussing ECEC training and pedagogical ideals.

Coding considered what is a good pedagogue (including considering the knowledge skills and attitudes required), how to become a good pedagogue and views and opinions of training. The focus of the analysis presented here is the tension between the child-centred ideal that is evident in the questionnaire and interview data, but its lack of substantiation in the observations.

### **Findings: Evidence of the Pedagogical Ideal**

The questionnaire data (see Figure One) demonstrated little variation in the average scores given to the items identified as knowledge, skills and attitudes. The median values were all ten, with the exception of *knowledge of appropriate resources for use with children*, *knowledge of how to construct the learning environment* and *knowledge of legislative requirements*, where the median was nine, with the mode being ten across all items. The questionnaire data therefore demonstrates the relevance of the knowledge, skills and attitudes items for the Hungarian ECEC context.

[Figure One: Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes for ECEC]

The top five items all related to attitudes, followed by *child development knowledge* and *being able to have conversations with a child*. Whilst acknowledging the lack of variation in the

average scores, the top items represent a particular reading of child-centred practice, which is grounded in the relationship between the pedagogue and the child, incorporating children's rights and acknowledging developmental perspectives. The questionnaire data demonstrates support for the child-loving ideal that was evident in the literature on Hungarian ECEC, but also illustrates that the notion of love is closely related to respect, empathy, patience and being emotionally open. Whilst the top five items are broadly related to the romantic construct of child-centred practice identified by Chung and Walsh (2000), there is also evidence of a children's rights perspective within the concept of *respect* and aspects of developmentalism in relation to *child development knowledge*. The ideal incorporates the three areas outlined by Chung and Walsh (2000), but with a focus on an emotional connection between the pedagogue and the children.

Students also identified with the ideal, reiterating the focus on love.

*Umm, I think to become a good pedagogue the love, the care, the attention, touching and caress[ing], hug them or kiss them on the cheek.*

Student One

*Full of love for the children... I think it's very important for a pedagogue. The pedagogue could be helpful, nice, professional is very good, but if he or she does not love the children, the children [will] feel it.*

Student Four

The students indicated a particular way of talking about ECEC within the Hungarian context, grounded in principles of love, whilst indicating that their interpretation of love was in relation to

both demonstrating signs of love through touch and hugs, as well as a love of children. The students' verbal articulations of love were closely aligned with the romantic construct of child-centred practice, but in exploring their views on training it was also evident that love was a relational construct, all-be-it one that posed challenges for them.

### **Learning the Ideal**

Both the questionnaire and the interviews demonstrated a preference for experiential learning within training (see Figure Two). Questionnaire participants were asked “*If you were to design a degree for trainee pedagogues what percentage of time would you give for the practical training (the rest of the time would be for attending university)?*” the average being 49.39 percent. This preferential average is higher than the current model of approximately one third of students' time being in practical training (Oberhuemer et al. 2010).

[Table One: Average Scores for Different Aspects of ECEC Training]

Students also emphasised a preference for time in the kindergarten in their interviews, with some indicating a want for more time, often relating this to developing relationships with children.

Student Six: *I know the children love me or some children love me, but the other ones naturally, they play and I am in their group, but they don't come to me and talk to me, nothing.*

Researcher: *And do you try to do anything to change this?*

*Student Six: Yes, I go to the children and start talking with them, with the children, but sometimes they don't answer or just stand around and play. So yes it's difficult.*

Other students also discussed the difficulty of developing relationships with the children in just one week and some of the students recognised that this was because they were in a process of learning to become a pedagogue. As Student Seven stated “I don't want to think about how to behave, so it needs to be natural”, illustrating her awareness that as a student she was still to reach a stage where her behaviours within the kindergarten were more ‘natural’. For Student Three, her student status was about developing her confidence, but she also recognised how this acted as a barrier to her forming relationships with the children.

*I know the children know that I am not a real pedagogue and I am just a student and I am not too confident in this situation.*

Student Three

The challenges in forming relationships with children were therefore attributed by all students to the short time period in the kindergarten and related to confidence for a couple.

Student Three also discussed how she found it hard to know when to play with the children. In particular, the student discussed not wanting to interrupt the children's play, whilst also identifying that she had a role to engage with it. The student could be seen to relate to the play-based principles of child-centred practice descended from the historical construction of Hungarian ECEC, but not their meaning in practice. Observation data also indicated that not all

students were confident in engaging with play, but the other students did not discuss this in their interviews.

Free-play sessions typically involved a lego table, a construction corner with large wooden blocks and small cardboard bricks, a home/kitchen corner, craft tables and a carpet area for reading, playing board games and/or puzzles. Children were free to move between activities with students supporting the children and engaging with the play activities as they deemed appropriate. As the above student demonstrates, students varied in their confidence to interact with the children. Discussion classes demonstrated how some students would provide resources in response to children's interests, such as traditional outdoor cooking equipment or natural resources collected from the garden area. However, it was also evident that students struggled with constructing an understanding of their role during the free-play sessions. The difficulties in identifying a role in free play relate back to Walkerdine's (1984) paradox of child-centred being a potentially liberatory pedagogy via the autonomy of free play, but one where aspects of developmentalism resulted in students identifying a need to engage in children's play, but being less clear on how to combine this with respecting children's autonomy.

### **Practical Training**

Despite support for a play-based, adult-loving, child-centred ideal, it was evident that realising it was challenging as students negotiated between different perspectives of child-centred practice. The ideal was also restricted by structural factors such as ratio requirements, with one pedagogue and an assistant with 20-25 children for most of the day, the type of interactions are constrained, such as limiting one-to-one interactions. Other constraints were related to the

tasks that students were expected to undertake whilst in the kindergarten. Each semester, practical training in the kindergarten was linked to other areas of the students' studies, such as folk tales, singing, physical education etc. Students therefore attended lectures based on the particular theme and there was an expectation of related activities in the kindergarten. In the first semester, when I was familiarising myself with the Hungarian model, the theme was Hungarian folk songs. Typically this meant the three hour observations consisted largely of free-play, a morning snack and some time outdoors if the weather was deemed appropriate. Towards the end of the morning, the student would sing a traditional song, sometimes also playing an instrument. There is nothing particularly striking about this brief overview of the use of songs, but there were two things I observed. The first was that children were not permitted to join in with the song, often being encouraged to "shhh" by the mentor-pedagogue or assistant. Although I was told that this was because the song was a "gift" for the children, a form of thanks for the time spent together, the expectation was that the children listened to the adult singing, but I found myself reading this as a rejection of children's autonomy through limiting their participation. The limiting of children's autonomy appeared to counter both what was evident in the literature (Kovács-Bakosi 2013) and the questionnaire. Thus whilst the 'gift' could be regarded as child-centred, the lack of autonomy appeared to go against the more democratic construct of child-centred practice.

The rejection of autonomy was set in a context of the second feature that I noted, whereby children undertook long periods of free-play within the kindergarten and the student was required to "motivate" the children to want to come and hear the song. The term motivate feels alien in the English context, but the premise was a student should plan how to engage children's

attention, how to stimulate their interest so that the children *chose* to participate. The two elements appeared contradictory, the notion of motivating children and enabling free choice reflected an autonomous child, whilst discouraging children singing countered this autonomy. The significance of my reading of these early observations are their consequences for considering the realising of the child-centred ideal and the structural constraints imposed by the training requirements.

During the third semester, in which I recorded my observations of the students, their discussion classes and conducted interviews, the focus of the semester was both physical education (PE) and storytelling. The morning observations typically involved a short free-play period before the children collected their PE clothes, put on their coats (depending on the weather) and walked to a PE hall in another building, where they would change into their PE clothes and the student would lead a 20-30minute PE activity. Having changed again and returned to the classroom, the children would have a snack, then a free-play period before the student told a traditional story. Structural requirements (such as the ratios discussed earlier) impacted on the potential for child-centred practice, as the PE time had to be timetabled to accommodate the different kindergarten classes. The timetabling imposed a temporal constraint, reflective of other constraints, such as meal and sleep times. Temporal constraints are inevitable as a result of both curriculum requirements and the needs of an individual kindergarten, such as the timetabling of PE sessions. Temporal constraints restrict child-centred practice, but the training requirements posed a further constraint.

The PE activity, storytelling and song illustrate the need for students to observably demonstrate a skill for the purpose of assessment. The constraints of assessment relate to broader concerns within ECEC workforce development, whereby training becomes a technological process of meeting particular skills, standards and/or competences (Dahlberg and Moss 2005). Whilst becoming a pedagogue is arguably reduced to that which can be observed or assessed, the research observations also demonstrated that assessment leads to the students' agency being put before the child's. The foregrounding of the student's agency is evident in the planning and conducting of the PE activity as the activity would be designed by the student in collaboration with the mentor-pedagogue. The activities were adult designed and led, with students typically providing instructions for children to follow. The below offers a typical example:

*The children line up and face [Student] who gives some instructions. The children are to be aeroplanes and the student demonstrates the action. The student talks to the children about how they have different coloured bands on. [Student] calls over those with yellow bands and shows them that they will crouch, whilst those with red bands climb onto blocks... [Student] shouts aeroplane and the children run as aeroplanes, when she shouts stop the children go to their positions of crouching or on the blocks.*

Observations of Student Five

Some students illustrated either in the discussion classes or interviews that they had considered children's physical development in designing the PE activity, including differentiating between the needs of different children. This demonstrates connections to developmental principles of



child-centred practice, but does not appear to relate to the child-centred ideal identified in the questionnaire and interviews.

The storytelling was similar to the singing, whereby students would motivate the children's interests. Although class discussions had indicated that not all children had to listen to the story, the mentor-pedagogue and assistant often brought children to the reading corner. One student also commented that she thought she had failed as not all children came to her story and the discussion classes and interviews illustrated that students focused on the performance and telling of the story, more than children's engagement. The performing of the story indicates students' awareness that this formed part of their assessment, but the assessment also restricted child-centred practice. Stories appeared to be chosen for their traditional-ness, often recommended by the mentor pedagogue, rather than reflecting children's interests. Some students followed the story with another activity, such as fruit tasting or face painting, but as this was the final activity of the week, opportunities for longer project work were missed. The story therefore appeared to be neither grounded in children's interests or a foundation for a series of learning opportunities.

The contradictions in the interpretations of child-centred practice were further evident in the discussion classes and interviews. Students would be appraised in discussion classes for resources that were deemed too 'school-like', such as worksheets, but the boundaries around what was school-like was weakly classified with no clear indicators of what would be included or excluded. The lack of articulation is illustrated in worksheets being identified as didactic and school like, but students leading PE classes were not. Thus, the kindergarten environment and

role of the pedagogue was being identified as distinct to that of a school teacher, but the articulation of the distinction was vague.

The vague distinction of ‘school-like’ reflects the broader finding of the contradictory messages about interpretations of child-centred practice evident in the data. For example, students were reminded in discussion classes that their role was to “motivate” the children’s interest in the story, exploring ways to do this, and that this did not mean all children had to participate, yet the observations demonstrated that children would be coerced to listen to the story. Further, the connection to assessment and students’ sense of failure if all children did not listen, indicates that the autonomous interpretation of child-centred was only privileged at given points of the day, such as the free play sessions. Child-centred was therefore also a vague construct, illustrating that the boundaries around child-centred were weakly defined.

The weak boundaries are evident in the different interpretations of child centred practice. Whilst the students’ identified with an adult-loving ideal and the adoption of free play, their romantic and democratic interpretation of child-centred was compromised by constraining children’s *choice* to participate in songs and stories and the foregrounding of the student’s assessment needs. The assessment practices illustrated the different interpretations of child-centred practice and how they co-exist, but not necessarily in harmonious ways. However, given the literature, questionnaire data and students identifying a child-loving ideal, there was nothing to indicate that it formed the focus of either the practical training or the students’ assessment. Thus whilst the questionnaire identified love, respect, patience, empathy and being emotionally open as the top five items, this was not reflected within the students’ practical training. Discussion

classes would often involve reminding students of the need to welcome children as they arrived in the mornings and some students were praised for their attentiveness towards the children, but this was not the focus of the class discussion. Further, in interviews, students could identify the child-loving ideal and their struggles in meeting it, but (perhaps inevitably) they were conscious that becoming a pedagogue was about passing the assessments. The assessment practices therefore not only imposed temporal constraints and constrained students' practice with the children, they also limited the opportunities for students to just 'be' with children.

### **The Realising of the Ideal**

The analysis presented is not intended as a criticism of the Hungarian model. The analysis is based on my interpretations, not a form of ethnocentrism (Marshall 2014) nor an expectation of reaching an enlightenment goal of a child-centred ideal. Instead, the analysis identifies how pedagogical ideals are not realised in the initial training of pedagogues as a result of structural constraints and weakly classified concepts. Structural constraints include ratios, timetabling and the assessment requirements of ECEC training models. Structural constraints are a feature of ECEC, often imposed as a result of policy requirements (Dahlberg et al. 2013), such as the requirement within the Hungarian National Core Program for PE activities. Daily routines will also create structural constraints, but the assessment tasks imposed another layer to the constraints. The assessment tasks countered the child-centred ideal identified in the survey that was grounded in a relational child-centred approach, as the student's needs and didactic tasks were fore-fronted in the tasks. Whilst aspects of developmentalism were present in the PE task, the adult led activity did not reflect other concepts of child-centred practice. The training

requirements focussed on observable tasks, not knowing the rhythm of the kindergarten, relating to children (Jensen 2015) or being a child-loving adult.

The weak classification of child-centred is further illustrated by the different interpretations of child-centred practice that were evident in the training. The free-play sessions supported romantic and democratic constructs, but students responded to children's play with varying levels of confidence, some developing resources in response to children's interests, whilst others struggled to find their role. The role of the pedagogue in free-play has more widely been identified as challenging, from considering the physical position of the pedagogue, to the balance between the pedagogue's and child's role and interests (Babich 2014; Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008). The classification of child-centred is therefore not about a one-size-fits-all approach, but given the strong relational focus in the questionnaire data and that students identified difficulties in forming relationships with children, discussing different interpretations and principles of child-centred and what they might look like would enable students to explore how to form relationships. At present, the adult-loving, child-centred pedagogy appears as a way of talking about ECEC, with assumed shared meanings, rather than an articulated concept.

The singing and storytelling also illustrated the weak boundaries and mixed interpretations of child-centred practice. Whilst students sought to "motivate" children to come and listen to a song or story, reflecting democratic interpretations of child-centred practice as children were autonomous in their decision to participate, this was countered by the coercion by other adults present and the boundaries of participation limiting involvement in the song. Inevitably the reading of the data is shaped by my own ideological position that I have come to appreciate is

grounded in sociological constructs of the active child, with social agency, with a right to be listened to (James and Prout 1997). Inevitably, children are asked to be quiet within English ECEC settings, but given the discursive construction of a child-loving, play-based, child-centred ideal evident in the literature (that reflects a romantic construct), the limits to children's agency were not anticipated.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the research there was evidence of the different constructs of child-centred practice, with the romantic child-loving adult, the developmental planning of the PE tasks and the democratic free play. The data demonstrates both students' struggles in mediating between these different constructs and how child-centred is weakly classified. The weak classification of child-centred is illustrative of its theoretical hybridity and complex history. Chung and Walsh's (2000) exploration of child-centred, along with other contributions (Walkerdine 1984; Wood 2007), demonstrates that child-centred is interpreted in different ways in relation to the cultural context, reflecting the three broad constructs: romantic, developmental and democratic. The constructs are not mutually exclusive, but illustrate the weak classification of how to be child-centred. The weak classification (evident in both the literature and the data) has consequences for how it is realised in ECEC training. The data illustrates how students struggle to mediate between the different constructs of child-centred practice. I am not suggesting that training should define child-centred practice and then look to ensure students' adherence to the definitions, but the blurred boundaries make an interpretation of child-centred hard to identify, exacerbated by no discussion of its meaning. The loving, child-centred ideal is a cultural construct, representing a set of beliefs and ways of thinking and talking about ECEC, but there is an assumed shared

meaning and an assumed acquisition of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to fulfil it.

Whilst ECEC training internationally has a model of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, whereby over time and through experience students move closer to ‘mastery’ (Lave and Wenger 1991), there is much within this process that reflects assumed shared ideals rather than articulated concepts.

It is inevitable that child-centred practice will be open to cultural interpretations. ECEC settings represent cultural sites, with deeply engrained understandings about children’s learning, concepts of a good childhood and children’s rights. The ways in which ECEC is described will reflect wider cultural values on the place and understanding of children within society. Researching ECEC in another culture can often be based upon features that appear different and interesting, but the research can also prompt a critical exploration of pedagogical ideals held by both the self and that of the other culture. The analysis of the Hungarian model is not an analysis of it being right or wrong, but about how it has wider implications for both understanding and realising pedagogical ideals in ECEC initial training.

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